



An infinite pity went out toward the old woman, bowed by sorrow. "He is your only child," said the judge.

Extenuating Circumstances

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Illustrated by W.T. Benda

IT was from the newspapers that Françoise learned that her son had been arrested.

At first she was unable to believe it; it was too much for her.

Her lad, her little lad, so well-beloved, so shy, who just a month ago had spent his Easter leave with her; her son a thief and a murderer? . . . She seemed to see him standing before her again in his soldier's uniform, his round young face smiling and kind; she felt again on her wrinkled cheeks his hearty good-by kisses, and, filled with happy and peaceful memories of him, she shrugged her shoulders, repeating:

"Of course it's a mistake. It's someone else."

Still, there it was, written with a big headline: "Crime of a Soldier." It had happened in his barracks, and his name was there in full.

Beckletoed, she crouched in her chair, her spectacles pushed up on her forehead, her hands clasped, her mouth trembling as she talked to herself in the vain silence of the kitchen, her eyes looking vaguely at the old dog lying by the open door, at the tall clock whose slow tick-tac gravely marked the time.

Someone came in. She started violently, crying, "Who's there?" Recognizing a neighbor, and wishing to hide her agitation, she asked:

"I was asleep. . . . It's hot. . . ."

Habitually reserved and silent, to-day she went on talking, talking, asking questions and making replies, fearing that she herself might be questioned. As she uttered her disjointed sentences, her one thought was: "Does she know?"

Unable at last to think of anything else to say, she relapsed into silence. With an odd expression the neighbor said:

"Is it long since you had news of your son?"

"No. . . . This morning."

She did not say how! But as she spoke there came to her an overwhelming desire to be reassured, to be comforted, to hear a voice who her indignation. "It's a mistake! It's not my lad—how could it be? . . ."

She held out the paper, and trying to speak easily:

"Have you seen this? . . . Queer, isn't it?"

Her throat dry, the tears welling up in her eyes, she asked:

"I was so stupid. . . . When I saw it first it gave me quite a turn! . . . What a lad! . . ."

The neighbor still remained silent. She repeated:

"But it's strange, isn't it? . . . It's strange! . . ."

"Yes, it's odd there should be two of the same name in the same regiment."

WITH a great sigh of relief the old woman cried:

"That's just what I say! . . . That's it! . . . there are two of them. . . . It's not mine! . . ."

"I don't know anything about this," answered the woman. "I'm only asking you. . . . It's to be hoped there are. . . . because if it's your lad. . . . They are saying it was him that robbed the cooper. . . . yes, the three hundred francs that were stolen when he was hung at Easter."

The mother drew herself up stiffly, white as death.

"How dare they? . . . He never did it. . . . never, never! . . . Aren't you ashamed of yourself? . . ."

What have we done to you that you put everything on

me? . . . My poor little lad! . . . Oh, but you shall all see! . . ."

And without shutting the door behind her, without even putting on her shawl, she hurried, almost running, to the railway station.

SHE arrived at the town just as it was striking seven. In the train, instead of disembarking, her fears had grown. She was no longer saying: "It is impossible!" but "Suppose it is true! . . ."

The journey had seemed endless, with the villages and fields rushing past her, the telegraph poles rising and falling giddily like a swing. When the train stopped she began to tremble, almost feeling that the moment to know the truth had come too quickly. She was murmuring Pater and Aves, adding her own supplications to the prayers that came mechanically to her lips:

"O, kind Virgin, you could never have let such a thing happen, could you? . . . The beautiful prayers I shall say to you presently! . . ."

Behind the iron gate the courtyard of the barracks stretched white in front of the square buildings. Soldiers were sitting on the steps, chatting in the evening calm. Her boy had taught her the different ranks. She stopped, saying (timidly):

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Sergeant, I want to ask you something. I want to know. . . ."

She hesitated, not daring to show her fear.

"It's this. . . . It's about my son. . . . Jules Michon of the 2nd Compagnie. . . . I want to know if. . . . if I can see him? . . ."

She tried to smile.

"I am his mother. . . . His mother. . . . No? But why? . . . Where is he? . . . Is he ill? . . . Then why can't I? . . . Yes, I know. . . . No, I don't know. . . . He has been. . . . (Concluded on page 76)

